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For the Members of the Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History and Culture at Salisbury University

What Appears Within: Interpreting Photographs as Documents

By Heather Burnham

One of the joys of working at the Nabb Center is that every day is an experience in learning. Often what I learn has to do with regional or American history; at other times I learn something I never knew about cultural or social history. But it is most exciting when I learn something new about how to think about and interpret history. The original documents and historical artifacts at the Nabb Center supply endless learning opportunities, and every day surprises me.

Perhaps my favorite type of historical document is the photograph; each one includes clues that yield glimpses of how we lived. As the Nabb Center staff researched collections and gathered images for the "Sources of Black Community: Family and Faith" exhibit, I was provided with an opportunity to review dozens of rare 19th century photographs of African-Americans from the Eastern Shore. In doing so, I was reminded once more of the ways in which photographs are more than mere records of a moment; they reveal a great deal about who or what appears within each one.

Until the advent of photography, portraiture was only available to the wealthy. Photographic portraits had been made from the early days of photography, but it was not until after the mid-19th century that photography studios became commonplace. By the end of the century most cities and towns of any size had at least one studio. Although affordable portraiture was within reach of all but the poorest families, it was still seen as a statement of status, the legacy of which, in effect, produced a record of the values and socio-economic standing to which the subject of the portrait aspired.

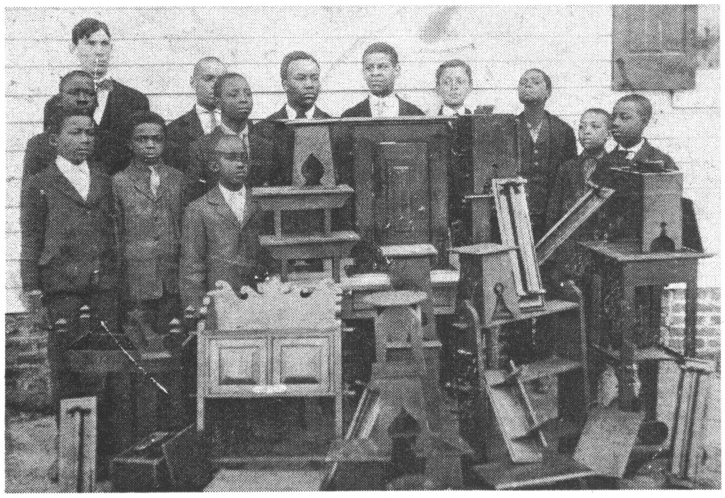
The following portraits speak of the character and ideals that the sitters wished to convey. Clothing, jewelry, stance or facial expression were selected or cultivated to convey important information. In the first (left), a young woman, Hellen C. Coulbourne (nee Waters), is a picture of demure sobriety. She displays no frivolous finery or adornment, save a small, discreet brooch at her meticulously arranged collar. These may not be her everyday clothes, but they indicate that she comes from an environment that places importance on presentability and outward appearances of virtue. Her clothing is simple and sober, reflecting the serious high-mindedness of her expression. Although quite pretty, it is as if she wants us to know that first and foremost she is intelligent and of sound moral character. With her head uncovered and a simple bow in her carefully smoothed hair, this is a relatively intimate portrait.

The same woman displays similar character in this second portrait (above). Slightly older and more matronly in appearance, she is fully dressed as she would be when venturing out into public. With a simple but elegant hat, dark gloves and a well-cut but otherwise plain jacket and skirt nearly devoid of fancy trim, she is the picture of a solid, middle-class gentlewoman. Her countenance and the way that she holds herself suggest that she is accepting of who she is and her standing in the world—a self-knowledge not found in her previous portrait.

The third portrait, of a man with a toddler, is more difficult to read. On the back of the photograph they are identified as Andrew Fassett and son. Formal family portraits are not uncommon, and portraits of a woman with a child are a familiar element of our cultural landscape, but a portrait of a man with a child seems more unusual to our 21st-century eyes. While we may not know if this is an African-American, a regional or a 19th-century tradition of portraiture, there is a great deal we can know about the man and child, nevertheless. It is clear that the man has experience with and knows what is expected of a respectable, well-groomed, middle class man. His hair is neatly clipped, mustache waxed (but not overly so), pocket handkerchief neatly arranged and shirt collar crisp and starched. The child is

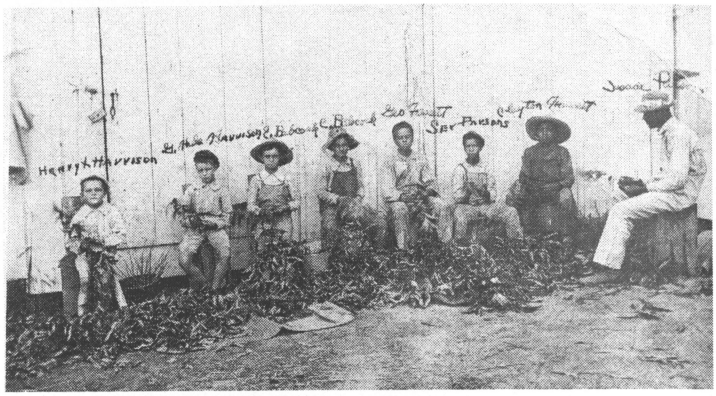
dressed in what are likely to be expensive lace collar and cuffs, similarly well-starched and crisply ironed. The inclusion of such adornment bears witness to the message of economic prosperity and what its symbolism must have held for the family.

Another group of photos stands in contrast to the portraits; although clearly posed, they are not characterized by the formality of the photographer's studio. Rather, they capture details of real life that could never be recreated in a studio. The first is a class photo from the Wicomico County Board of Education Collection (bottom left). The students, boys of various sizes, attended one of the county's "colored" schools, where they were taught industrial arts among other things. We see them here with what are presumably the products of their education such as pieces of furniture, some of



it quite fancy. The boys themselves do not look fancy, although they are likely to be dressed in their Sunday best. They stand at attention like little soldiers, equally serious, overseen by a white man who we might assume is their teacher. These boys lack the natural adult composure and assurance displayed in the portraits above. They seem uncomfortable, ill at ease, almost coerced (as I always felt in class photos myself). Sadly, the impressive stack of furniture does not seem to be a source of pride for any of the boys, nor for the teacher. It is easy to imagine them exhaling in unison and turning away once the shutter was snapped.

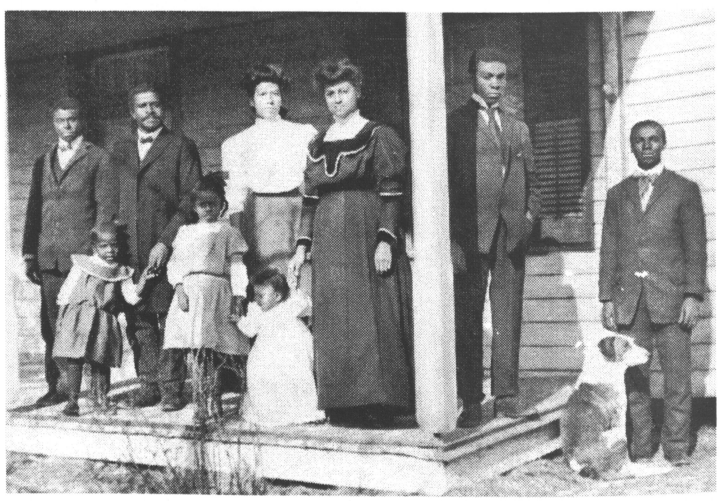
The next photo is of another group of boys and is unusual for two reasons: It is a mixed-race group photograph, and it is of agricultural work, which was not often photographed as it was hard, dirty work that most people aspired to rise above (top right). It is even more rare to see that on the Eastern Shore, blacks and whites did identical agricultural work side by side. These boys, working with one older man (perhaps he is teaching them the task at hand), are "picking buds" for fruit trees, that is, they are preparing small fruit tree "whips" to be planted. All but the two on the left are wearing farm clothes and wearing them comfortably; clearly they are used to this attire and this work. None of the boys look happy, but, again, all but the two on the



left have a look of grim determination and appear resigned to their chores. It is the two boys on the left who are notable. Their clothes are not farm clothes; they are quite literally a cut above and impractical for farm work with short pants exposing bare knees. While the boy on the far left appears untroubled, the boy next to him has a rather sullen expression, as though he knows that there are other options if only he were allowed. It is not difficult to imagine that the boys on the left were not necessarily used to this sort of work but were drafted as temporary farm workers.

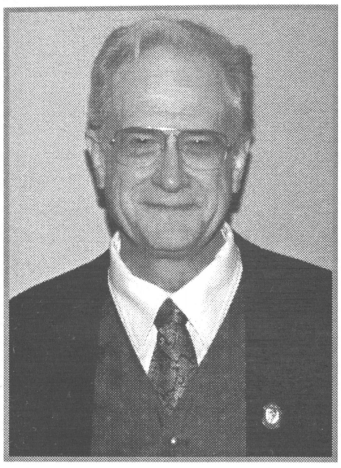
The last photograph is perhaps my favorite in the exhibit. It is archetypal in nature and could be of any upstanding middle class family at the end of the 19th century, nearly anywhere in America. In fact, this is an African-American family from Somerset County here on Maryland's Eastern Shore (below). The woman to the left of the porch column is once again Hellen C. Coulbourne, this time the matriarch of a family. To all appearances the group embodies what many Americans aspired to, a solid and unified family life, together in a home of their own. We can see that they are comfortably well-off, have healthy children, live in what looks to be a substantial home typical of the region and have a devoted family dog. At a time in history when the majority of Americans still farmed, it is easy to imagine that the father in this photograph, wearing a frockcoat, has a profession and that at least some of the children attend school regularly. That they arranged to have this photograph taken at this time and in this manner, tells us that the family wanted to have a record of the collective face that they presented to the world.

We are fortunate that these photographic documents have survived. They allow us to have firsthand knowledge of the values and principles that the people appearing in them cherished and wished to convey.



In a Word

By G. Ray Thompson, Ph.D., Nabb Research Center Director



Our current exhibit, "Portrait of an Eastern Shore Woman," addresses the lives and lifestyles of 19th-century Delmarva women. Although we have "showcased' three specific women—Anna Ella Carroll, Hariett Ross Tubman and Clara Gunby Huffington—we have, using artifacts and documents, created an image of what life would have been like for the majority of Eastern Shore women at both the beginning and the end of the 19th century.

The exhibit attempts to rectify the traditional omission of women from the historical record by depicting the women of Delmarva as they lived, worked, dressed and thought. Photographs, portraits and sketches bring to life long-forgotten women, surrounded by the objects which they would have so readily recognized--butter churns, bread tubs, candle molds, spinning wheels, kitchen utensils, and handmade clothing and quilts. Letters, ledgers and examples of their handiwork open a new vista. From the backbreaking labor of women's daily chores to the inner thoughts penned in correspondence, ledgers and journals, Delmarva's women re-emerge from the past. The faces and hands of these women are illustrative, allowing the viewer to formulate an even more personal image of our ancestors. These women of the past are no longer merely names written on a worn page of a Bible; they are women with faces, strong-willed, sorrowful, filled with stamina and indomitable in character, creating an exhibit well-worth seeing.

Spotlight on Collections: Wicomico County Board of Education

By David Ranzan, Salisbury University Archivist

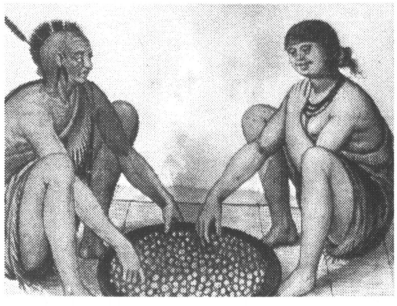
A series of periodicals, monographs and photographs highlighting the history of the Wicomico County education system and its methods was recently donated to the collections by the Wicomico County Board of Education. The series includes photos of many of the one-room schoolhouses that once dotted Wicomico County's landscape, ranging from 1867 to 1910. Several of the schools closed down in the 1930s as students were moved to larger and newer facilities. This collection also includes photographs focusing on the construction of Wicomico High School from 1952-1954. At this time, access to the photographs is restricted. Processing is ongoing, as each photo is added to a database with descriptive terms and is being digitally preserved.

Winners in spelling contest May 1916

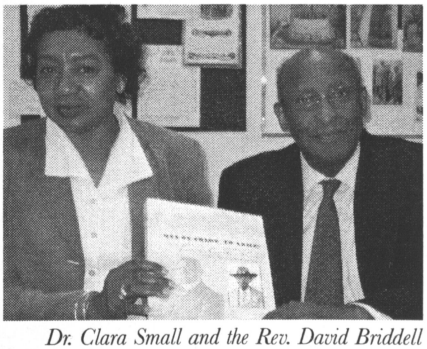
Nabb News

The Nabb Center strives to bring relevant and engaging public programming to our membership and the general public, and we have been most gratified by the interest shown and the number of people that have attended the exhibits and presentations. Recent events bear mentioning because attendance at each has exceeded our expectations.

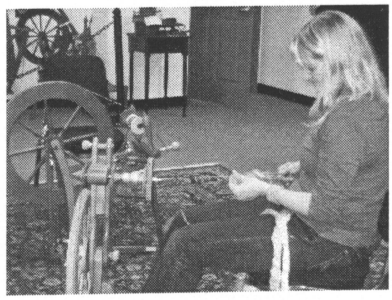
On April 7, the annual Wilcomb Washburn Distinguished Lecture in American History, this year featuring Dr. Henry Miller, director of research for Maryland's state museum at Historic St. Mary's City, featured a presentation on 400 years of human use of the Chesapeake Bay. It proved to be our biggest event of the academic year with an audience of nearly 200. Miller's interdisciplinary presentation brought together history, archaeology, botany, horticulture, marine biology and cultural anthropology in a fascinating program that was co-sponsored by the Lower Eastern Shore Heritage Council and made possible by the Maryland Humanities Council.



On April 10, Salisbury University's Dr. Clara L. Small and co-author Rev. David Briddell discussed their newly-published book, *Men of Color To Arms: Manumitted Slaves and Freed Blacks from the Lower Eastern Shore of Maryland Who Served in the Civil War.* The standing-room-only crowd engaged the authors in a lively question-and-answer session and purchased over 40 copies of the book. Quite a success! *Men of Color To Arms* is available through the Salisbury University Bookstore. Please call 410-543-6085 for further information.



Dr. Clara Small and the Rev. David Briddell



Susan Brazer

On April 23, two events turned a spotlight on women's history and attracted a remarkable crowd. A spinning wheel demonstration by Salisbury University faculty member Susan Brazer and a presentation on Baltimore's Women's Industrial Exchange by Nabb board member Eleanor

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Continued from pg. 3 Nabb News

Eleanor Mulligan

Mulligan proved to be ideal complements. Surrounded by historic artifacts in the Nabb Center's women's history exhibit, Brazer provided a fascinating lesson in spinning colorful woolen yarns on her own spinning wheels. Flanked by spinning wheels and other tools once used by Eastern Shore women, visitors were encouraged to spin their own yarns and many stayed for hours, watching and learning. Mulligan's presentation on the origin and growth of the Women's Industrial Exchange (WIE) movement was exceptionally well attended, filling the adjacent gallery to capacity with rapt visitors. Mulligan focused, in part, on Baltimore's WIE shop (still operating today), which provided a retail outlet through which middle-class women of the 19th century who had fallen on hard times might earn a living through needlework and other skills. For many years the WIE also operated a café, famous to Baltimoreans as much for its dedicated staff as it was for its tomato aspic and homemade chocolate syrup.

The Nabb Center is proud to announce that the book *The Boston Family of Maryland*, by Matthew Montgomery Wise, is now available on the Nabb Research Center Web site in its entirety. In addition, Wise's draft version of the long-awaited *The Long Family of Maryland*, compiled and edited by Polly Batchelder, is available online. For more information and access to both of these volumes, please visit our Web site at http://nabbhistory.salisbury.edu/archives/famhistcol/bostonfamilymd.asp.

Summer Hours and Holiday Closings

The Nabb Center holiday closings will be May 31, July 5 and September 6.

Beginning May 24, the Nabb Center welcomes researchers in the Reading Room library during our normal summer hours, Monday 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Please note that we are working diligently to update and standardize our records and the archival collections will not be available to researchers from May 24-August 29. This does not affect our Reading Room library or microfilm resources, which will continue to be available to all researchers.

Events and Exhibits

Exhibit: "Sources of Black Community: Family and Faith" through July 30.

Exhibit: "A Portrait of an Eastern Shore Woman," through May 21.

Galleries are open 1-4 MWF or contact the Nabb Research Center at 410-543-6312 for an appointment. Exhibits are free and open to the public.

www.nabbhistory.salisbury.edu